



PNEU

Statement on 'The Great Debate' on Education

October 1977

PARENTS' NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL UNION

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'The Great Debate' on Education

Statement by Parents' National Educational Union (PNEU)

[In a speech at Oxford in October 1976, the Prime Minister called for a public debate on Education. PNEU has taken the opportunity to state what it stands for and what it does in education, since its members believe that the principles laid down by Charlotte Mason remain as sound today as they ever were.]

IT was at a meeting in 1887 that Charlotte Mason first presented her scheme 'to enlighten and encourage parents in bringing up their children'. Written on a single sheet of foolscap, it contained her brief for a method of education in the home and a training for teachers. From it, PNEU emerged with its enlightened schools and its unique and indispensable 'home-school' service for expatriate and other families.

Those associated with PNEU education have followed the Great Debate initiated by the Prime Minister in October, 1976, with interest for PNEU has the best of both worlds, progressive principles and well-educated children. The failure of some schools to apply similar principles effectively to the education of children has led to much parental anxiety and is the direct cause of the national discussion on standards.

PNEU Principles

Why is it that a PNEU background leads to successful achievement, whether in a school or through teaching by a parent in the home? Charlotte Mason's principles explain it in part. Her chief precepts were that parents should take an interest in the education of their children; that the child was an individual in his or her own right; should grow up in a natural environment and be allowed to develop in an atmosphere of ordered freedom created by a well-balanced and liberal curriculum involving knowledge of God, man and the universe. Children's abilities should never be underrated and, freed from the onus of marks and prizes, they would have many interests through experience and the constant use of well-written books.

Children should be encouraged to learn rather than be 'talked at' by a teacher and the pursuit of knowledge should give satisfaction to pupils and teachers. The key to knowledge and maturity lay in putting the child in touch with the minds of great men and women through literature, biography, art and music. She summed up her views in one sentence as 'Education is an Atmosphere, a Discipline, a Life'.

These principles, interestingly enough, bear a remarkable similarity to those of the Plowden Report issued only ten years ago by the Central Advisory Committee on Education. In a recent comment on her Committee's Report,

Lady Plowden rejected the view that progressive methods might be too soft but accepted the criticism that insufficient stress had been laid on the need for numeracy and literacy.

The PNEU method avoids this pitfall and its products combine the benefits of a traditional liberal education with a sound basis in English and Mathematics. Academically, morally and spiritually these children are well fitted to encounter the realities of our time. It is true that most of them have the good fortune to be members of well-adjusted families which themselves set high standards of conduct and application and the result is an enhancement of both educational and personal standards.

In one direction, PNEU is uniquely qualified to comment on one of the issues of the Debate—the core curriculum. The home-school families and most PNEU affiliated schools follow a curriculum set out in 'programmes' which lay down for the teacher or parent the detailed syllabuses and books to be studied in each subject along with advice on how to teach them. Such programmes are prepared for each age group from five to fifteen, although allowance is made for individual children's variations in applying them.

PNEU does not foresee a general adoption of these methods since they are designed for specific circumstances but the PNEU method illustrates that their use does not lead to narrowness or sterility when the curriculum is well designed.

A typical primary age PNEU curriculum consists of the following topics:

Religious Knowledge	Geography
English: Reading	History
Writing	Science with
Language	Nature Study
Creative Writing	French (optional)
Tales	Picture Study
Poetry	Art and Craft
Leisure Reading	Music
Mathematics	Physical Education

PNEU Affiliated Schools

There are some forty schools affiliated to PNEU in England and Wales and twenty overseas. A parent has a virtual guarantee of a sound education when a school includes 'PNEU' in its title. The quality of the teaching staff is high and parental involvement in the running of the schools is normally close.

Each school is independently run and many are Trusts. The degree to which they follow the PNEU programmes varies and a PNEU school will in future 'be recognised by its spirit and attitude and by its adherence to PNEU principles'.

The comment of an H.M. Inspector at a PNEU school recently is typical. He told the Headmistress, 'If I had a daughter, I would like her to be at a school like this'.

The Home Education Service

PNEU's unique contribution to education today is to provide an education service to families living or working abroad. It functions as an educational

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charity dependent largely on its fees. Home-school families are found in over 100 countries. The teaching is usually carried out by the mother with some help from the father and frequently children are above the level of attainment for their age when they return to school in this country. Small groups of children are formed where it is convenient. Home education is also provided for a small number of children in this country when special reasons for it exist, such as isolation or some handicap.

PNEU is justifiably proud of its 'home-school' service, since it is a vital corner of the educational structure, and of the success of these far-flung families.

A former H.M. Chief Inspector for Primary Schools wrote:

'I formed the impression both from looking at the programmes themselves, from seeing the work sent in by the children and the letters from their mothers, that a most valuable service was being provided. The staff do more than prepare the programmes and comment on the results: they take an immense personal interest in all the families and are frequently called upon to give advice on matters far outside the programmes themselves. I was deeply impressed by the devotion and care and constructiveness of their work.'

Final Comments

PNEU is constantly seeking to improve its methods and its impact educationally while retaining its basic principles. Like most British movements, it is eclectic and does not reject new material or approaches. We have stressed in this document the importance of principle in the search for high standards and we regret that the four topics selected for national discussion are all confined to the practicalities of education since we believe that this nation needs to establish a sound philosophy on which to base the education of its young people. It may be an exaggeration to say that where there is no vision the people perish, but without that vision we shall be in greater danger as a country than we shall be by reaching the wrong answers to practical questions.

PNEU enjoys the goodwill of all who know of its aims and achievements and it will continue, as it has for nearly a century, to be a beneficial influence on children at school or at home.